

The University of Chicago

SOCIAL CLASS AND FRIENDSHIP
AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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SOCIAL CLASS AND FRIENDSHIP AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

A STUDY OF A DOWNTOWN SCHOOL
AND THE EFFECTS OF THE
SOCIAL CLASS ON THE CHILDREN'S
LIFE AND FRIENDSHIP



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ABSTRACT

Friendship status and reputation of school children in a typical middle western community are found to parallel social-class position. Data are presented in terms of the votes cast and the votes received by each social-status group, on each of five statements about friends and each of eighteen statements about reputation. Age differences are discussed.

The sociological literature on class systems in American communities raises a number of problems for research at the childhood level. The present study is of the general question concerning to what extent and in what observable ways the factor of social status affects the social development of children. Specifically, is the social-class position of the family a contributing factor in determining a child's choice of friends or the child's reputation among his age-mates? If so, how does its operation vary with the increasing age of the child?

A community was selected for which the status structure was known and in which families whose children would be the subjects of the research had already been class-typed. Children of two age levels were chosen as subjects.

THE SUBJECTS

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COMMUNITY

The community, which will be called "Hometown," was selected as a typical middle western town. It has a relatively stable population of six thousand; is located in a fertile agricultural area; and is economically dependent equally upon agriculture, manufacturing, and retail sales. The community is not within a metropolitan area; there is no college, university, or state institution in Hometown; neither is it a health or summer resort. Its local autonomy and coherence are therefore undisturbed. Approximately 90 per cent of its inhabitants are native-born whites; there are no Negroes or orientals and but two distinguishable ethnic groups—a small Polish group and a somewhat larger group of Norwegians.

THE SOCIAL-STATUS HIERARCHY OF HOMETOWN

In Hometown there are five social classes, which will be referred to by letter, from Group A, signifying the group of highest status in the community—the "upper" class—to Group E, signifying the group of lowest status.

Group A, 2 per cent of the population, is locally known as the "upper crust," "the five hundred," "the landed gentry," "the old families," or "the money crowd." This group is referred to as "the power behind the throne"; while they take little part in community affairs, they are the people who are consulted on critical issues and who are supposed to "keep the community in line." Members of this class are distinguished largely on the basis of wealth and lineage.

Group B consists of professional men, officials of the industries of Hometown, and the "better" businessmen. Members of this group are the active community leaders: members of the school board, officers of commercial organizations, holders of political office, and church leaders. They have higher incomes than the average, live in big houses, and are the most highly educated. Members of this group are referred to as "the people you go to if you want to get anything done," "the pillars of the church," and "the backbone of the community." They have the reputation of high moral standards and take a great deal of civic pride in the community.

Group C is the "average man" of Hometown. This group constitutes the bulk of the membership of various associations—the rank and file of the economic, political, church, and social organizations. These are the people who have their bridge clubs and "get-togethers" which fill the society columns of the local newspaper. They make their livings as small businessmen,

white-collar workers, lesser professional men, skilled tradesmen, and skilled workmen.

Group D is the large group which is primarily concerned with making a living. They constitute the lower-income group, working at less skilled jobs and as laborers. These people live in the poorer sections and in the areas surrounding the two large industries of Hometown. They are referred to as "poor but honest," "the little people," or "the people who never give anybody any trouble." Members of this group tend to place great emphasis upon respectability and upon piety.

Group E is distinctive primarily on the basis of nonrespectability. Members of this group are considered dirty, shiftless, dishonest, and biologically and morally inferior. People in other classes refer to them as "those river rats," "the squatters along the canal," or "the bottom of the heap." They have the lowest income and the least education, and they live in dilapidated shacks clustered together in outlying sections of town. These people made up the bulk of the federal relief lists of a few years ago, and their names appear often on local police records.¹

THE SUBJECTS

The subjects of the present research were all children enrolled in Grades V and VI and X and XI of the public schools of Hometown. The median age for the younger group was eleven years and three months; for the older group, sixteen years and three months.

¹ The description of the social structure of Hometown has been taken from confidential field reports on file with the Committee on Human Development of the University of Chicago. The writer had no part in the research on the social structure of Hometown.

For detailed descriptions of the methods used to differentiate social classes see W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* ("Yankee City Series," Vol. I [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941]), chaps. iii, v; *The Status System of a Modern Community* ("Yankee City Series," Vol. II [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942]), chap. i.

Group A of Hometown is comparable in most respects to the upper class of Yankee City. Hometown is not old enough, and this group is not large enough, to differentiate an upper-upper from a lower-upper class. Group B closely resembles the upper-middle class of Yankee City. Group C corresponds to the lower-middle class of Yankee City. Group D, resembling Group C more than Group E, takes on the color of a lower-middle, rather than an upper-lower, class. Group E is clearly the lower-lower class.

The distribution of subjects according to the class position of their families is shown in Table 1. There were no children from Group A in Grades V and VI. The two in Grades X and XI have been included in the discussion, in Group B; and at both ages children have been grouped into four categories—B, C, D, and E—to correspond with the social classes of Hometown.

THE INSTRUMENT

FORM AND CONTENT

A modification of the sociometric test of Moreno and an adaptation of the Guess-Who test of Hartshorne and May were administered as a single instrument.² The test booklet consisted of a series of short statements or descriptions, each followed by blank space in which the subject wrote the names of children who, in his opinion, fitted the description.

Data on friendship status were obtained from responses to the following five statements (the wording was varied according to the age of the subjects):

These boys and girls are my best friends; they are the ones I play with most of the time.

These are the boys and girls I wouldn't want to play with.

Here are the boys and girls my mother wants me to play with.

Here are the ones my mother doesn't want me to play with.

If I could have anybody I wanted for a friend, this is the boy or girl I would choose.

Data on reputation were obtained from responses to short descriptions, such as the ones used to describe the two extremes of the trait "clean—dirty":

² J. L. Moreno, *Who Shall Survive? A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations* (Washington: Nervous and Mental Diseases Pub. Co., 1934); H. Hartshorne and M. A. May, *Studies in Service and Self-control* ("Studies in the Nature of Character," Vol. II [New York: Macmillan Co., 1929]). The children were tested in 1941-42, the elementary school pupils in their regular classrooms, the high-school pupils in the assembly hall. All tests were administered by the same individual, to secure consistency of instructions.

Here is somebody who always thinks about keeping clean, neat, and tidy looking.

Here is somebody who doesn't seem to care about keeping clean, neat, or tidy.

Reputation items for fifth- and sixth-graders included:

Well dressed—not well dressed; good looking—not good looking; fights a lot; popular—unpopular; likes school—doesn't like school; a leader; clean—dirty; always has a good time—never has a good time; good manners—bad manners; plays fair—doesn't play fair.

TREATMENT OF THE DATA

TABULATIONS

A separate tabulation was made for each of the twenty-three items at the lower age level and for each of the twenty-five items at the upper age level.

Judges (children who wrote the booklets) and subjects (children mentioned in the booklets) were divided into four groups according to the social class of their parents. The data will be discussed in terms of group

TABLE 1*
DISTRIBUTION OF SUBJECTS ACCORDING TO SOCIAL-CLASS POSITION

SOCIAL CLASS	GRADES V AND VI				GRADES X AND XI			
	Boys	Girls	Total	Per Cent of Population	Boys	Girls	Total	Per Cent of Population
A.....	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	1
B.....	6	4	10	6	6	9	15	7
C.....	17	13	30	17	36	52	88	43
D.....	48	59	107	62	45	43	88	43
E.....	14	13	27	15	6	7	13	6
Total.....	85	89	174	100	95	111	206	100

* The relative proportions of the five social classes differ at the two age levels: there are fewer children from lower-status groups in the Hometown high school.

The larger proportion of children from Group C in Grades X and XI is probably due to at least two factors: first, the presence of rural children, who tend to come from better-than-average farm homes and, second, social mobility. The social distance between Groups C and D is relatively small; it is possible that many Group D families who are upwardly mobile will have had time to establish themselves in Group C by the time their children reach high-school age.

For high-school students, one other pair was added:

Takes part in many school activities—takes no part in school activities.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Since the research is concerned not with the child's actual friendships but with his statements about them and not with the child's personality but with the child's reputation, validation of the data is unnecessary.

The reliability of both the Moreno and the Guess-Who tests has been established by the findings of other studies.³

³ For the Moreno test, reliabilities range from .93 to .96 (see Wilbert I. Newstetter, Marc J. Feldstein, and Theodore M. Newcomb, *Group Adjust-*

results—the votes obtained by each group of subjects from each group of judges.⁴

ment: A Study in Experimental Sociology [Cleveland, Ohio: School of Applied Social Sciences, Western Reserve University, 1938]; Leslie Day Zeleny, "Sociometry of Morale," *American Sociological Review*, IV [1939], 799–808; Helen H. Jennings, "A Sociometric Study of Emotional and Social Expansiveness," in *Child Behavior and Development*, ed. Roger C. Barker, Jacob S. Kounin, and Herbert F. Wright [New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1943], pp. 527–44).

For the Guess-Who, test-retest correlations are reported of .76 for boys and .80 for girls (see Caroline McCann Tryon, "Evaluations of Adolescent Personality by Adolescents," in Barker, Kounin, and Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 545–66).

⁴ While girls mentioned girls more often than boys and boys mentioned boys more often than girls,

The data at the lower age level deal with the judgments made by fifth- and sixth-grade children regarding fifth- and sixth-grade children; at the upper age level the data deal with the judgments made by tenth- and eleventh-grade children regarding all ninth-, tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade children.⁵

THE M.S.J.

In order to correct for the variations in size of subject groups and judging groups, all the data were recomputed in terms of an index called the "M.S.J."—the number of times mentioned per subject per judge.

THE FRIENDSHIP STATUS OF ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Figure 1 presents the data on "best friend" and "don't want for a friend" for fifth- and sixth-grade children. The number of votes, expressed by the M.S.J., appears on the vertical axis; groups of subjects appear on the horizontal axis.

Each group of four bars signifies the M.S.J.'s obtained by that group of subjects from each of the four groups of judges. The first bar of each cluster shows the M.S.J. obtained from Group B judges; the second bar, that from Group C judges; the third bar, Group D judges; and the fourth bar, Group E judges.

Figure 1 shows that, on "best friend," the largest proportion of the votes obtained by each group of subjects came from the corresponding group of judges—the largest M.S.J. for subjects B is obtained from judges B; for subjects C, judges C; for subjects D, judges D; for subjects E, judges E.

a preliminary analysis of the data revealed no sex differences between status groups. Consequently, the data are presented in terms of mixed sex groups.

⁵ Judges were instructed that they might name any child in Hometown of their own age range. Ninety-three per cent of all names mentioned by fifth- and sixth-graders were the names of fifth- and sixth-graders. Tenth- and eleventh-graders, however, distributed their votes over a wider range—90 per cent were the names of boys and girls in Grades IX, X, XI, and XII. The remaining 7 and 10 per cent of the votes have not been included in the data here presented.

In other words, children are selected as friends by children from their own social level more often than by children from other social levels.

On the negative item, "don't like," of all the votes given to Group B, the largest proportion came from Group E; and of all the votes given to Group E, the largest proportion came from Group B. The mutual rejection between Groups B and E is greater than that between any other two groups.

The average M.S.J. for each group of subjects is shown by the horizontal arrow drawn across each group of bars. On the positive item in Figure 1, the average M.S.J. decreases as status decreases—the lower the social class of the subject, the fewer times he is mentioned as a "best friend." On the negative item, the trend is reversed—the lower the social class of the subject, the more times he is mentioned as "don't want for a friend."

Figure 1 also shows how any group of judges cast its votes. The bars which come first, second, third, or fourth in each cluster show that Group B judges voted most often for Group B subjects on "best friend," less often for Group C subjects, still less often for Group D, and least often for Group E. Group C judges voted for Group B subjects more often than for its own members—as is also true of Group D. Group E children are the only ones who voted more often for members of their own group than for Group B.

With the exception of the group of lowest status, children tend to select as friends, first, children of higher status than their own and, second, children of their own status level.

The data on the other three items on friendship follow the same pattern as shown in Figure 1. The high degree of relationship between the family's social position and the friendship status of the child is striking. There is a mirror-like relationship between the favorable and the unfavorable items, with the children of families of high status receiving the favorable votes and children of low status receiving the unfavorable.

The child from a family of upper status occupies an enviable position—many of his classmates consider him their friend or would choose him for a friend or mention him as their parents' choice. Very few of his classmates mention him as a person they would not want for a friend.

The child from a family of lower status faces the opposite situation. He is seldom

It is not the contention of the writer, in the light of these findings, that young children are conscious of the class structure of their community. They probably select and reject their associates not on the basis of social class itself but on the basis of a whole configuration of factors related to social class—whether or not the child is clean, the kind of clothes he wears, the kind of playthings he has, the language he uses, his manners, where he lives, his attitude toward school, and a host of similar factors. The child from the middle class may be told not to play with "that Smith boy—he's dirty," or "he lives down by the tracks," or "he steals," or "he swears." The child of lower class may have it pointed out to him that "that White boy—his father's rich," or "he thinks he's too good for you," or "he's not your kind." The child, consciously or unconsciously using these criteria in selecting his friends, is probably reflecting the class stereotypes as he has learned them from his parents; and he applies these criteria uncritically.

THE REPUTATION OF ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Figure 2, showing the data on "good looking" and "not good looking," is representative of all the statements on reputation for fifth- and sixth-grade children. The mirror-like relationship between the positive and the negative items of this and the other pairs was found to be consistent for all such items. The average M.S.J. for each group of subjects shows a steady decrease, as status decreases, on the favorable items; and a steady increase, as status decreases, on the unfavorable items.

As exemplified by Figure 2, Group B children rank first on every favorable statement dealing with reputation; Group C, second; Group D, third; and Group E, fourth. On the unfavorable items, Group E ranks first every time.

On the whole, data on reputation follow the same pattern as data on friendship. One difference between the two sets of data is the greater extent to which all groups of

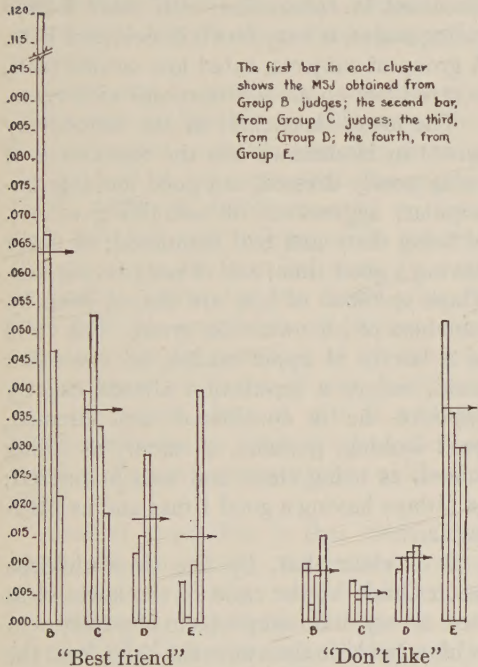


FIG. 1.—Votes obtained by fifth- and sixth-grade subjects on "best friend" and "don't like."

mentioned as a friend (and then only by children of the same social position as his own), but he is often mentioned as a person his classmates do not like and whom parents do not want their children to play with.

Not only do social-class factors seem to determine which children are mentioned favorably and unfavorably, but they seem also to influence the way in which each child casts his votes. Group E children, for example, are the only ones who give an appreciable number of favorable votes to Group E children.

judges agree in regard to the reputation of any given group of subjects. All judges, regardless of their own social class, agree that Group B subjects, compared with C, D, and E, are well dressed, good looking, good in school, leaders, and so on. Judges are in similar agreement concerning the other groups of subjects.

The consistency with which the four groups of subjects are ranked on the nine favorable and the nine unfavorable items is even more remarkable when one considers the fact that the original statements de-

knowing nothing of the social background of the children and being careful to distinguish between good looks and good grooming, would rate the children very differently on this item from the way in which they rate each other.

The data warrant the conclusion that fifth- and sixth-graders make judgments about each other along extremely stereotyped lines and that the halo effect, so often discussed in connection with more formal rating scales, is very much in evidence here. A group of subjects, rated low on one trait, is rated low on all eighteen and vice versa.

The lower-class child in the elementary school in Hometown has the reputation of being poorly dressed, not good looking, unpopular, aggressive; of not liking school; of being dirty and bad mannered; of never having a good time; and of not playing fair. These opinions of him are shared even by members of his own class group. The child of a family of upper status, on the other hand, enjoys a reputation almost exactly opposite—he is considered well dressed, good looking, popular, a leader; as liking school; as being clean and well mannered; as always having a good time; and as playing fair.

It is clear that, by the time children reach Grade V, the child of the lower class faces a very different problem of adjustment in his school life than does the child from the middle class.

THE FRIENDSHIP STATUS OF HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS

Figure 3 shows the data on "best friend" and "don't want for a friend" for high-school subjects.⁶ It will be seen that there is a clear relationship between social class

⁶ The M.S.J.'s for the high-school data are, in every case, smaller than those for the elementary-school data, owing to the fact that high-school subjects are a larger group than high-school judges. Votes from tenth- and eleventh-graders are distributed over Grades IX, X, XI, and XII; while at the younger age, votes from fifth- and sixth-graders are confined to Grades V and VI. As a consequence, small differences in the height of bars are more significant in Figs. 3 and 4 than in Figs. 1 and 2.

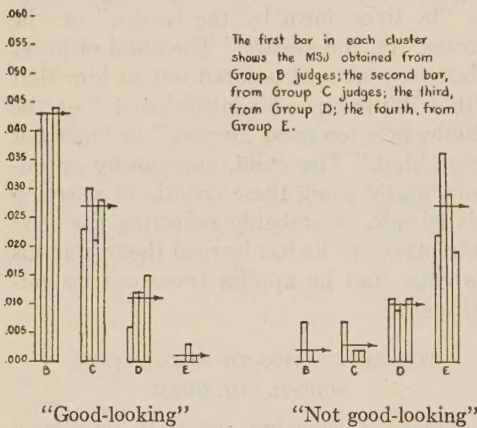


FIG. 2.—Votes obtained by fifth- and sixth-grade subjects on "good-looking" and "not good-looking."

scribed "traits" of different orders of objectivity. For example, "dirty—clean" can be more objectively rated than "good looking—not good looking"; and the latter, in turn, can probably be more objectively rated than "always has a good time." Yet the data show the same pattern from item to item.

It is probable that Group E children—because of the fact that they are from the lower class—are actually less well groomed than those of Group B; they are more likely to be "dirty" and certainly more likely to be "not well dressed." It is somewhat less probable, however, that Group E children should actually be less good looking than Group B. Certainly, the adult who steps into a fifth-grade classroom in Hometown,

and votes obtained on the positive item but that, on the negative item, differences of social class are not apparent. Data for the other statements on friendship for high-school students show the same results as in Figure 3.

There is, then, this important difference between the two age levels: while both age groups are discriminating along class lines in their selection of friends (and their parents' selection of friends), the older judges are not doing so as regards those whom they reject as friends.

There are a number of considerations which may explain the age difference. First, the adolescent probably exercises more independence of judgment than the younger child. Although factors related to social class may influence his immediate choice of friends, when he is called upon to make judgments concerning the larger group he may base his judgments on factors which are more directly the result of the behavior and personal attributes of each individual. The high-school boy or girl is probably judged more on the basis of talent and personality than as a representative of his class group.

Another possibility is that class differences are as clearly recognized among adolescents as among younger children but are differently expressed. It may be that expressions of rejection at an earlier age become expressions of indifference; that the adolescent boy or girl who receives no votes as a "best friend" may be socially rejected quite as much as the younger boy or girl who receives many votes on the item, "wouldn't want for a friend."

Not being mentioned at the high-school level may be indicative of an even greater degree of rejection than unfavorable mention at the elementary-school level. At the younger age, Group E children may still be considered potential playmates and, as such, come in for their share of attention. At the older age, Group B (and, to lesser extent, Group C) may be psychologically so far removed from Group E that the latter do not enter their thinking either as potential

friends or—as will be seen in the following section—even as persons to be mentioned on the test of reputation. Just as in other areas of human relations, indifference may express greater social distance than does antagonism.

Still another factor is that differences in social status may themselves be less recognizable at the high-school age. In the fifth and sixth grades, there are more children of

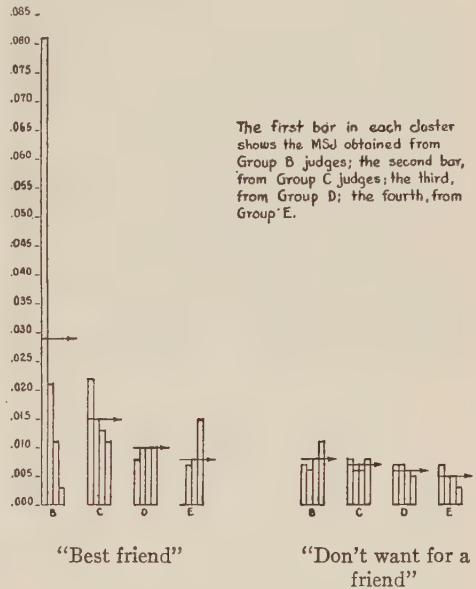


FIG. 3.—Votes obtained by high-school subjects on "best friend" and "don't want for a friend."

lower class (Group D, 62 per cent; Group E, 15 per cent) than there are in high school (Group D, 46 per cent; Group E, 6 per cent). The lower-class child drops out of school before the middle-class child.⁷ This suggests that Group E (and, to lesser extent, Group D) at the high-school level is not a typical lower-class group; its members may

⁷ In connection with another research project, a study was made of all sixteen-year-olds in Hometown. Forty-six boys and girls who were sixteen in 1942 were not enrolled in school. The families of 15 of the 46 had not been class-typed at the time of writing. Of the remaining 31, 5 fell in Group C, the other 26 in Groups D and E—all evidence of the operation of the selective factor in the high school.

be less representative of lower-class behavior and therefore less conspicuous than the corresponding group at the younger age level. If a boy whose family occupies the very lowest social position has continued in school to the tenth or eleventh grade, he is quite likely to have certain characteristics which set him apart from other lower-class boys: he is probably more ambitious, more studious; he may have certain special abilities; he is likely to find the school less frustrating socially, perhaps because he tries to adopt the middle-class values and behavior which he sees about him. In short, he is probably the mobile member of his social class.

If we follow this hypothesis further, we may assume that such a select group of lower-class boys and girls would not be the focus for unfavorable mention from their classmates; their appearance and behavior will not differentiate them markedly.

These factors probably explain the data on reputation, well as friendship.

THE REPUTATION OF HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS

Figure 4 represents the data on the twenty statements concerning the reputation of high-school subjects. It shows essentially the same pattern as the data on friendship—there is a clear relation between social class and number of votes obtained on the positive items but no significant relationship on the negative items.

Group E high-school subjects receive very few votes on either positive or negative items (the same is true, to a lesser degree, of Group D). The older group of judges seem indifferent toward lower-class subjects and do not single them out on any of the items about reputation. This finding seems to support the hypothesis suggested above—that, in all probability, the lower-class high-school students are actually less conspicuous than lower-class students in the elementary grades. They probably look and behave like middle-class boys and girls.

Figure 4 illustrates, furthermore, a fact which was even more in evidence on other

statements about reputation—that Group B, so outstanding on the favorable items, receives the largest proportion of the votes on many of the unfavorable, as well. This suggests that boys and girls of families of upper status are conspicuous among their classmates, irrespective of their personal attributes—some of them enjoy desirable reputations; others, undesirable—but in either case they are mentioned a disproportionate number of times. Adolescents of high status seem to find themselves in the public eye so far as their peers are concerned. Once in the limelight, both attractive and unattractive features are revealed.

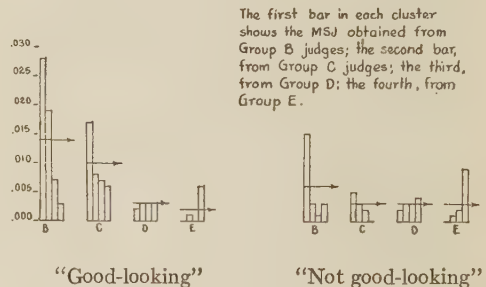


FIG. 4.—Votes obtained by high-school subjects on "good-looking" and "not good-looking."

Adolescents of middle and low status, on the other hand, being less conspicuous, have less well-differentiated reputations. Group E boys and girls, judging from the data on both friendship and reputation, are, as a group, socially isolated and ignored by their associates.

In short, as regards reputation, social class seems to operate differently in Hometown at the two age levels. At the fifth- and sixth-grade levels, membership in upper-class groups carries with it a kind of insurance that one's reputation will be favorable—certainly never unfavorable. Membership in the lower class is almost certain to result in unfavorable reputation among one's peers.

At the high-school level, upper status is a sure indication that the adolescent will at least be the center of attention in his group, whether his reputation is favorable

or unfavorable. As the lower-class child grows older, he drops out of school, or, by taking on the behavior and values of middle-class associates, he tends to lose his distinguishing lower-class features.

IMPLICATIONS

The finding that social-class differences in friendship and reputation are so well established by the time children reach the fifth grade may be of some importance to the psychologist. The child of eleven or twelve soon becomes aware of his reputation and desirability as a friend, and he must make his adjustment in the light of what others think of him. Perhaps one of the reasons that the child of lower class is so often a "behavior problem" in school is that he finds himself rejected by his classmates and enjoys such an unenviable reputation. This may also be one of the reasons why lower-class children often find school unpleasant and unrewarding and why the child of lower class so often welcomes the first opportunity to leave school altogether.

From one point of view the data also raise the general question of the extent to which the school, in communities like Hometown, is encouraging democratic living on

the part of its children. It is undoubtedly true that the teacher plays a central role in influencing the opinions of one child toward another. While there is no systematic research on the topic, anecdotes and observations suggest that teachers' behavior toward children of lower class is different from their behavior toward those of middle or upper class and that this discrimination follows the differences in reputation among the social groups.

One of the crucial problems facing the school today is the reconciling of its middle-class point of view with the lower-class culture of so many of its pupils. This might be done not only through the personal relationships created between teacher and child but also through the relationships between child and child fostered by the teacher. More research is needed, of course, on the whole problem of the school's role in relation to the social-class hierarchy: whether it encourages or discourages social mobility and in what ways. Certainly, this is a problem of far-reaching significance to a society which places so much faith in its schools as an agency for inculcating democratic attitudes in its children.

CHICAGO

